

Creating Social Entrepreneurs: The Catalyst for Reform of Public Education

Kristy Hebert 04 April 2011

Introduction

The majority of public school children (K–12) are underserved educationally. They are not reaching their academic potential, as evidenced by high dropout rates, low college graduation numbers and abysmal academic achievement. Historic efforts to improve schools have rarely achieved their intent. Current methods of addressing the needs for improved school and student performance are not functioning as intended.

The social impact of an unhealthy public education system is vast and far-reaching, and previous attempts to fill the gaps have failed for the most part. While some legislation has been approved to provide policy to support reform in public education, this policy is meaningless unless carried out by appropriately trained educational leadership.

Education leaders who embrace the tenets of social entrepreneurship are able to envision successful

strategies and programs that have a high probability of improving the education sector. Few current leaders understand that schools are a revenue-generating business with a social-value-generating structure.

Federal funds to support public education are flowing at the highest levels in history. Schools are able to invest in innovative programs to enhance learning environments. Few leaders in public schools have awareness, much less an understanding, of how to leverage these funds.

Creating Social Entrepreneurs

Advance Innovative Education (AIE), a 501(c)(3) founded in Louisiana, along with the E.J. Ourso College of Business at Louisiana State University (COB), has created Redesigning Lessons, Re-envisioning Principals (RLRP), a nontraditional pathway to prepare educational leaders. RLRP is a principal development program based on four core tenets—autonomy, accountability, distributed leadership and social enterprise. Business and education principles intersect to develop educational leaders who focus on the “double bottom line,” ensuring that schools are always focused on their mission and producing results for their clients, while at the same time generating the revenue required to operate the core business and reinvest profits into new or expanded services.

Economic development is definitely tied to the reform of public education. In fact, economic growth is dependent

upon schools that can produce students who have 21st-century skills and knowledge—for current needs as well as those that we cannot yet even identify. Creating a proficient labor pool is of the utmost importance in building stronger local economies. The 20th-century model of schooling cannot meet the emerging need for new understandings; thus the urgent need a decade into the new century to produce school leaders with the capacity to tackle the unique challenges of either repairing broken systems or creating ones that work. What is required, essentially, are educational leaders who are social entrepreneurs and who possess turnaround skills. Successful organizations serve their clients well. Since students are the clients of public education, principals must create organizations that keep their clients happy. Principals must be CEOs of schools.

RLRP's cohort structure reflects the development of a learning community. RLRP takes several best practices of business and nonprofit management and combines them with the best practices of education. The vision behind RLRP is that public education is refocused so that large-scale student success is a reality.

Embedded, sustained experiences, rather than short workshops, characterize RLRP's pedagogical approach. During internships, Residents complete "action research." They work with individual mentors to identify a project in the school that is more than only oversight of traditional school management. AIE teaches Residents grant writing,

how to obtain money from corporations, and how to leverage the per pupil dollars that come from the state.

Building Social Enterprises

Learning teams (3–5 members of a cohort), led by AIE Residents, are given \$2,500 in start-up money to implement enterprise methods that teach students financial skills, focusing on investing and implementation of an entrepreneurial endeavor. The “business” should work to help create an additional source of revenue for the school. The proposition is to enable students to really work, study and give to the community in a way that both sustains the school and helps the society evolve.

One project was to launch a cyber café in a school. And here is the twist: “We want to get permission to open it up to parents,” according to the Resident leading the team. In stage one of the development, the cyber café would be run by students and opened up to families. Why go to Starbucks when there are so many perks of the local coffee shop that happens to be at school?

Another team’s vision: “The schools will become a community economic development center, and you’ve got classrooms and you’ve got space for food prep and restrooms, so you can have evening events, or special classes.” The team plans to eventually invest in a center for dropout prevention as part of its service offering as well.

AIE's RLRP program is teaching leaders how to run a school like a business. AIE believes competition is a good thing and that all schools should function as autonomous schools—their profit dependent on the educational market. Just as CEOs have to deal with a board, so do principals. Principals must manage the money the way they see fit to maximize student achievement. RLRP participants must know how to maximize community resources to fund school initiatives to make up for budget shortfalls in times such as these when states are freezing or even reducing education budgets. AIE's RLRP emphasizes that balancing a budget is not only about making cuts, as most traditional school systems do. Balancing a budget should focus just as much on looking at increasing revenue; this concept is not often found in traditional models of principal preparation. Solutions for ensuring that a school meets its mission do not come from the typical bureaucratic decisions put in place in traditional systems. RLRP's model is a dramatic about-face from a world view that saw a principal as a facilities manager, competing with other budget planners and executors for access to more in a system that was less about merit and more about legacy.

Most of the RLRP participants enter the program without much of a business background, so they greatly benefit from classes provided by the COB. Those classes deal with everything from marketing to consulting. AIE's RLRP has created a particularly helpful class called "Other

People's Resources."

Outcomes

To evaluate the program is to evaluate the work of the leaders who graduate from the program and the results they generate for their students. On the critical success factors related to 1) innovation, 2) initiating and managing change, 3) maximizing resources and 4) building external support, on a scale from 1 (most negative) to 5 (most positive), the mean scores for Residents averaged 4.82.

The applicants to the program are looking to be catalysts of change. The partnerships (now reaching beyond the borders of Louisiana) that hire RLRP Residents are looking for leadership that will propel their strategic plans and serve different students in different schools. A prime example of this partnership is Avoyelles Parish Schools in Central Louisiana. They have multiple choices for their students, and they know that with those multiple choices must come various types of principals.

Customizing a program that fits the needs of individuals who apply—both in the delivery of curricula and in the financing of the tuition—is needed, and this is what RLRP does. The customization does not stop there. Our partners—charter schools, traditional school districts and independent schools—all have different children and need leaders who recognize this.

RLRP does not meet the needs of everyone. There is no master's degree earned, but Residents learn how to innovate schools and engage community. The program doesn't stop with the 14-month certification process. It continues with 2-year official support for our Residents and our partners. However, that support continues for as long as we are needed to help the individuals and the partners with whom we collaborate.

At a recent Wallace Foundation conference, a presenter stated that soon private providers (for principal training) would put university departments of administration and supervision out of business. According to Peter Drucker, "Knowledge has to be improved, challenged, and increased constantly, or it vanishes." AIE embraces Drucker's philosophy.

Kristy Hebert, PhD, is CEO of Advance Innovative Education (AIE), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. AIE promotes urgent, systemic change in education by undertaking reform initiatives that deliver dramatically improved teacher and school leader performance, and by developing strong partnerships to increase student success and ultimately enhance the quality of life in Louisiana.